

IDENTIFICATION: A dry land turtle, the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) has a high, domed shell up to 15 inches. They have stubby, elephant-like hind feet and flattened front feet with large toenails for digging. They have a long life span, ranging to 80 years old or older. The gopher tortoise is considered a keystone species, which means its presence is required for the health of its ecosystem.



Gopher tortoises favor dry, sandy ridges with open stands of longleaf pine, turkey oak and other scrub oaks. They also frequent open areas around road shoulders, food plots, and rights-of-way with well-drained sandy soil. They dig long sloping burrows up to 30 feet long, extending to 9 feet below the surface. Burrows typically have a characteristic mousehole shape, with a flat bottom and rounded arched top and sides, much like the gopher itself. The dens are shelter for the gopher tortoise as well as a variety of other sandhill residents, including the indigo snake and the diamondback rattlesnake.

They feed on grasses and other plant material near the ground. Feeding trails are often visible leading from the den's sandy apron to foraging areas. Eggs are laid in or near the den apron in May, June, and July and hatch in about 80-100 days. Young tortoises are about the size of silver dollars. The nest is very vulnerable to predation by crows, raccoons, opossums, foxes, skunks and other animals.

FORESTRY CONSIDERATIONS: Disking permanent openings in the fall and winter will stimulate early successional plant species preferred by gopher tortoises. Thin mature pine stands frequently and prescribe burn on a 2-3 year rotation. Convert sites capable of growing longleaf pine after the final timber harvest. Stock loblolly and slash pine plantations with 300 or fewer trees per acre. Be cautious with heavy equipment around the dens to avoid collapsing them, crushing eggs and harming young gophers that dig very shallow burrows.

DISTRIBUTION BY COUNTY: Gopher tortoises are protected by federal law in Alabama counties west of the Mobile and Tombigbee Rivers and in Mississippi and Louisiana. They are protected by state law as a game animal in the rest of Alabama with **no open season**. Counties in which they are federally protected include Choctaw, Washington, and Mobile. Other counties in which they occur are Baldwin, Barbour, and Bullock. Butler, Clarke, Crenshaw, Coffee, Conecuh, Covington, Dale, Escambia, Geneva, Henry, Houston, Monroe, Montgomery, Pike, Sumter and Wilcox.

Photo and Text Credit: Threatened and Endangered Species of Alabama: A Guide to Assist with Forestry Activities, Second Edition, USFS



This information is provided by the Alabama Forestry Commission

For more information please visit: www.forestry.alabama.gov